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AUTHOR	Juvonen, Jaana
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ABSTRACT

School and district administrators are taking a variety of measures to improve school safety. The job of selecting an appropriate program, however, is not an easy one, considering the myriad possibilities and the need to know where to allocate precious resources. RAND examined the literature regarding these programs and found that only a handful have been evaluated, and even fewer have been deemed effective or even promising. The goal of this paper is to describe the options currently available for schools. Key components of various approaches are analyzed in terms of their potential positive and negative effects to assist administrators in the selection of policies, programs, and procedures while waiting for evaluations to be conducted. Programs considered include physical surveillance, including weapons deterrence and the presence of security guards or officers on campus; school policies designed to prevent violence by punishing those who perpetrate violence; instruction-based programs designed to address the precursors of violence, including bullying; profiling of potentially violent individuals; counseling at-risk students; and conflict mediation and resolution. While waiting for evaluations to be conducted, decision-makers can make meaningful choices by matching their goals with the primary goals of the various approaches. (Contains 30 references.) (RT)

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School Violence

Prevalence, Fears, and Prevention

Jaana Juvonen

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Issue Paper

RAND EDUCATION

School Violence

Prevalence, Fears, and Prevention

Jaana Juvonen

School shootings such as the one at Columbine High School in 1999 have left deep scars in our nation. The apparently random nature of these highly publicized shootings has raised public fears to epidemic proportions. According to 2001 polls, more than 50 percent of parents with children in grades K–12[1] and 75 percent of secondary school students[2] now think that a school shooting could occur in their community.

Schools are taking a variety of measures to improve school safety. These include the use of metal detectors, the presence of security guards on campus, rules and regulations regarding student conduct and dress, profiling of potentially violent students, anti-bullying instructional programs, and counseling and mediation. Which of these approaches work? Which will reduce the incidence of violence in our schools and alleviate the fears of parents and children? How can school and district administrators choose among the myriad possibilities, and how can they know where to allocate precious resources?

RAND examined the literature regarding these programs and found that only a handful have been evaluated, and even fewer have been deemed effective or even promising. The goal of this paper is to describe the options that are currently available for schools. An analysis of the key components of various approaches in terms of their potential positive and negative effects can assist in the selection of policies, programs, and procedures while we wait for evaluations to be conducted.

FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School violence is not confined to urban schools; it is also prevalent in suburban schools.[3] Violence is most common in large schools, and middle school students are the most likely targets of violent behavior.[3]

According to a joint report of the Departments of Education and Justice,[3] violent crime overall has declined since the early and mid-1990s. However, this decline is relatively small. For example, the percentage of students who reported being victims of crime at school decreased from 10 percent in 1995 to 8 percent in 1999. Whereas the chances of serious violence, such as shootings, are very low, violence continues to take place in schools. The latest data available on criminal incidents (school year 1996–1997) reveal that about half of public middle and high schools reported at least one incident of physical attacks, fights (without a weapon), theft, larceny, or vandalism. Also, even in light of the 5 percent decrease in weapon carrying between 1995 and 1999,[3] 7–8 percent of

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students in 9th to 12th grade continue to report having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. What is more, official statistics are often lower than the actual rates of violent behavior because of biases in reporting.[4] Overall, then, violence remains a problem in American schools.[5]

During one school year, about half of public middle and high schools reported at least one incident of physical attacks, fights (without a weapon), theft, larceny, or vandalism.

ELEVATED CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY

In light of these statistics, the concerns and fears of parents and children appear to be out of proportion to reality. The publicity that school shootings have received is a likely cause of fear. But there are other reasons for elevated fears. In addition to their concerns about violent behavior, students are fearful of and intimidated by other, less serious forms of peer hostility. These include physical aggression such as shoving and pushing, face-to-face verbal harassment, public humiliation, and rumor mongering. About 20–30 percent of American students (i.e., over 10 million) repeatedly either engage in or are the targets of bullying tactics[6] that contribute to the climate of fear.[7] In fact, youth ages 8 to 15 rank bullying as more of a problem in their lives than discrimination, racism, or violence.[8] And children who view themselves as targets of bullying show high levels of anxiety and depression that impede their school performance.[9]

Youth ages 8 to 15 rank bullying as more of a problem in their lives than discrimination, racism, or violence.

Bullying and more serious violent behavior are not separate problems. Childhood bullying predicts person-oriented crime in young adulthood.[10] Thus, bullying is one precursor of more extreme forms of hostility. In addition, a small but potentially volatile group of youth not only perceive themselves as the victims of peer taunting and ridicule, but are also aggressive themselves.[11] Although more research is needed to identify the conditions under which victims of bullying are most likely to lash out, it is clear that hostilities among school children increase the risk for subsequent violence.

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS DOING TO IMPROVE SAFETY?

Faced with intense public pressure, school administrators are taking action and implementing programs designed to curb school violence. These programs include:

- Physical surveillance, including weapons deterrence and the presence of security guards or officers on campus
- School policies designed to prevent violence by punishing those who perpetrate violence
- Instruction-based programs designed to address the precursors of violence, including bullying
- Profiling of potentially violent individuals
- Counseling at-risk students
- Conflict mediation and resolution.

The sheer numbers of these programs can be daunting; there are over 200 institutional programs alone. And the specific goals and foci of these approaches vary. Some aim to boost physical safety by reducing extreme forms of violence, such as shootings. Others promote a psychologically safe school climate (i.e., one in which students and staff feel protected). Some are proactive in trying to prevent the development of violent behaviors, whereas others are reactive. Certain programs focus on skill building, whereas others rely on the deterrent value of punishment. Some approaches involve the entire school and sometimes even parents or the community at large; others are designed for students identified as "at risk." Finally, certain approaches focus on resolving incidents rather than identifying problem students. Hence, school-based violence prevention efforts are based on drastically different sets of assumptions about what works. Unfortunately, the assumptions are rarely questioned, and these approaches might not work as well as we wish. Each of these approaches is discussed in more detail below.

Physical Surveillance

Among the most common physical surveillance measures currently used in schools are weapons deterrence and the use of campus security and police officers. These strategies are aimed at preventing the most extreme forms of violence.

Weapons deterrence. Although bullying is far more prevalent than violence that involves weapons,[3] one primary goal of improved physical surveillance measures is to prevent youth from bringing weapons to school. Metal detectors and searches of student lockers and book bags are not uncommon, especially in large urban middle and high schools. Indeed, fewer weapons are confiscated with these measures in place[12] than are confiscated without them, implying that students are bringing weapons to school less frequently. Whether metal detectors and searches can prevent a well-planned incident from taking place is less clear.

Weapons deterrence does not address the reasons why students carry guns to school.

Recent reports from administrators suggest that some schools are decreasing their use of metal detectors and searches because they appear to increase students' fears and anxieties. Thus, weapons deterrence may increase physical safety but compromise the psychological safety of students. And it does not address the underlying reasons why students carry weapons to school.

Campus officers. The presence of security guards and officers employed by the school, district, or local law enforcement on school grounds is gaining popular support. This is especially true since the shooting incident at Granite Hills High School near San Diego, California, where a campus police officer was able to intervene quickly and prevent further violence. The duties of campus officers vary from patrolling the school and grounds to assisting school personnel with discipline issues. In the spring of 2000, President Clinton bolstered the use of campus officers by providing more than $60 million to support 452 officers nationwide as part of the Justice Department's COPS in Schools program. Media reports[13] indicate that President Bush might triple the amount of federal support for this program. However, little is known about the long-term or concurrent effects that the presence of uniformed officers might have on students' feelings of safety. For example, although the presence of an officer may provide peace of mind for administrators and parents, we cannot presume that students view officers as their allies or defenders. The presence of uniformed officers can, in fact, breed a sense of mistrust among students and hence adversely affect school climate. Indeed, some preliminary evidence suggests that physical surveillance methods (metal detectors, searches, and security guards) can predict increased disorder.[14]

School Policies

A wide variety of school policies related to student conduct and dress code is enforced in schools across the nation. Rules and regulations that directly target violence are *zero-tolerance policies* inasmuch as a single violation results in punishment, often either suspension or expulsion. Although many of these policies pertain specifically to weapons possession at school, others target drug use or possession. Some districts and schools have adopted anti-bullying zero-tolerance policies, thereby targeting precursors to violence.

Regardless of the specific foci of these zero-tolerance policies, they involve an explicit statement of consequences (i.e., punishment). These "get-tough" practices are presumed to send a message to potentially violent students and decrease school violence. But they may exacerbate problems, also. Repeated school transfers increase the risk for subsequent violence.[15] Also, suspensions are relatively strong predictors of dropping out of school,[16] which, in turn, is associated with delinquency.[17,18] One explanation for the links among suspension, dropping out, and delinquency is that a student who is not in school has more unstructured time, with the greater likelihood of contact with deviant peers.[19] Hence, in some cases, punishment tactics employed by schools with zero-tolerance policies might result in an increased risk of violence for the individual student and for society at large.

Get-tough practices are presumed to send a message to potentially violent students and decrease school violence. But they may exacerbate problems, also.

Instructional Programs

A program is defined as instructional if it consists of multiple lessons that are implemented by teachers or other adult staff. These programs tend to focus on precursors or antecedents of violent behavior[20] with the presumption that, by targeting behaviors that predict violence (e.g., bullying and impulsive behavior), more serious manifestations of aggression will be prevented.[5] Other programs, such as character education and lessons in social skills, aim to make individuals more socially competent.[21,22]

Instructional programs vary in their target audience; some are designed for all students and the whole "system," whereas others are developed as special programs for "at-risk" youth. One example of a *systemic* program is the Bully/Victim Program, designed originally by Dan Olweus in Norway.[23] This program was selected as the only model program for school-based prevention at the secondary level in the Blueprint Programs by the Center for Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder, along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other institutions in 1996. The program aims to alter social norms by changing school responses to bullying incidents. In addition to explicit anti-harassment policies, the program is designed to improve the social awareness of staff and students. Instructional materials designed for all students (not only bullies and victims) include a series of exercises that help students see problems from the perspective of the victim of bullying and raise consciousness about the role of bystanders in encouraging the bully. The program provides teacher training and information for parents about the program.

Instructional programs focus on the precursors of violent behavior with the presumption that serious manifestations of aggression will be prevented.

Numerous instructional violence prevention programs are available for elementary schools, but only a handful are designed for secondary school students. The most promising at the secondary school level are targeted for at-risk youth, typically aggressive students. Most of these programs (e.g., Positive Adolescent Choices Training, PACT; Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways, RIPP; and Adolescent Transitions Program, ATP) involve adult-led small group sessions on anger management, conflict resolution, etc. Role-playing and other interactive teaching methods are used. Although these programs are all curriculum-based, they are often implemented much like group counseling sessions and only sometimes are they embedded within the larger context of a school-wide prevention approach. Short-term outcomes for such programs are promising;[19,24,25] however, there are limited data on their long-term effects. A recent long-term followup[26] shows that repeated interventions that include only problem youth can be counter-effective. Grouping high-risk youth together appears to reinforce negative behavioral patterns in a form of "deviance training," increasing rather than decreasing the risk that they will engage in anti-social behavior subsequently.

Systemic anti-bullying programs alter social norms by changing school responses to bullying incidents and increasing social awareness.

Profiling of Potentially Violent Youth

One approach that gained support immediately following the highly publicized school shootings was early identification or profiling of potentially violent students. This approach is based on the assumption that we can predict who will become violent. Although a great deal is known about early warning signs of violent behavior, the truth is that many students fit these "profiles" and only very few will ever commit a violent act.[27] Hence, many students who will never commit violence are labeled as potentially violent. The label itself can lead to stigmatization and, if linked with a segregated group intervention, the labeling can also significantly limit the opportunities of the identified students.

Many students who will never commit violence are labeled as potentially violent.

Counseling and Mediation

Other violence prevention efforts rely on counseling students with disciplinary problems and mediating in specific incidents of conflict as needed. These are reactive rather than proactive approaches.

The assumption underlying the counseling approach is that students who repeatedly get into trouble need specific attention and services. Counseling often involves parents and teachers. Mediation of conflicts, on the other hand, is incident- rather than person-based: the goal is to negotiate and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner as soon as they happen. Mediation and conflict resolution programs provide opportunities for modeling and rehearsing critical negotiation and resolution tactics.

Various school personnel can be in charge of the counseling and mediation. In some schools, the administrators (e.g., assistant principals) who are in charge of discipline problems handle counseling and mediation too. Some schools have trained school psychologists/coun-

selors or "violence prevention coordinators." The professional qualifications of these personnel vary; there are no uniform educational requirements for school violence prevention coordinators. Yet the qualifications and training of personnel might be critical factors, determining the success or failure of these approaches.

Mediation and conflict resolution programs provide opportunities for modeling and rehearsing critical negotiation and resolution tactics.

Another approach is peer mediation. Although these programs can be effective in elementary schools, some evidence indicates that high school mediators are not well screened.[28]

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR SCHOOL SAFETY MEASURES?

The most recent national data from the 1996–1997 school year includes a short section on school actions and reactions related to discipline issues.[29] The survey of 12,340 principals shows that 74 percent of middle schools and 82 percent of high schools used some form of violence prevention program (ranging from one-day to long-term programs) in 1996–1997. Of these, about 90 percent of the schools had zero-tolerance policies for firearms.

In California, 63 percent of high schools employ at least one part-time law enforcement officer.

Only 13 percent of public middle schools and 21 percent of high schools had police or other law enforcement on campus 10–30 or more hours per week. In all likelihood, these figures have substantially changed since the 1996–1997 school year. For example, according to a more recent survey,[30] 63 percent of high schools in California employ at least one part-time law enforcement officer.

FURTHER EVALUATION IS NEEDED TO DETERMINE WHICH APPROACHES WORK

Schools are sincere in their efforts to confront the antecedents of violence and alleviate students' fears, and they have implemented a variety of thoughtful programs. But do these programs work?

At this time, only a handful of violence prevention approaches have been evaluated, and even fewer have been determined to be effective or promising. Proper evaluation research is costly and typically deemed a luxury by funders and program developers. As a result, large amounts of both federal and state monies are spent to support school violence programs with little or no data on their potential effectiveness.

Given the lack of data on program effectiveness, school and district administrators have few guidelines to help them make informed choices among the myriad of alternatives. Instead, they are likely to make decisions based on such factors as the availability of program materials and training, cost, ease of implementation, and public relations issues such as how visible a particular tactic might be. Thus, popular methods such as physical surveillance and zero-tolerance policies regarding guns and violent behavior may be convenient, but they are not necessarily the most effective approaches to prevent the development of violent behavior.

School safety is clearly one of our national priorities. We owe it to our children to make sure that the methods we use to promote school safety will work. We cannot justify large amounts of taxpayer money for programs that feel good or that appear to be working according to the testimonials of a few administrators, teachers, or parents. Instead, rigorous program evaluation studies are needed. With the most promising approaches, longer-term evaluations must also be conducted.

MAKING MEANINGFUL CHOICES

While we are waiting for evaluations to be conducted, decisionmakers can make meaningful choices by matching their goals with the primary goals of the various approaches. School-based violence prevention approaches can address (1) outbursts of violent behavior (e.g., shootings), (2) the precursors of violence (e.g., hostile school climate, bullying), and (3) the fears and anxieties associated with each. However, the methods that address these primary goals can conflict with one another and have unintended effects. For example, the fears and anxieties of students cannot necessarily be reduced if the primary goal is to increase physical safety by means of increased surveillance. Hence, choices need to be made between psychological safety and physical safety; proactive strategies and reactive strategies; targeted and whole school approaches; punitive and instructional methods; and, finally, between incident-based and person-based interventions.

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